

Vector in Open Space

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There are numerous reasons — only one of which is its name — for assuming that a unique project such as the Ars Electronica Center could never have come about without its "godparents". The most important reason for its coming into being, however, is the knowledge which has grown out of the internationally-acclaimed Ars Electronica Festival and the Prix Ars Electronica: the knowledge that a future-oriented approach is essential for understanding and dealing with the present. A knowledge which, at the leading-edge of cultural development, is an indispensable element of competence in engaging those areas targeted from the start — the arts, technology and society — as an integrated field of endeavor. One fundamental consideration in the setting of an agenda is therefore its positioning in that environment in which the Ars Electronica Center, derived as it is from the activities of the Festival and the Prix, is rooted. Thus the *raison d'être* of the Ars Electronica Center is established in part by a functioning model: that is, artistic commitment as the guiding principle for navigation through a world in the throes of a media-led transformation; as the driving force for society's confrontation with the new contextual realities of our age; and as a resource for the impending tasks of design and acculturation of the new media-based environment.

Against this programmatic backdrop, the Ars Electronica Center cannot be regarded simply as a centre of cultural competence, but — where culture is understood as technological evolution — as itself an art-project of this culture. As a logical consequence, this project has the nature of a "work-in-progress", both in regard to its capacity for integration and in terms of its compatibility with the interests of a general public. On the other hand, a project so exposed to the elements of change and innovation requires a strong identity that sets it above considerations of transient techno-chic and short-lived hype.

The Ars Electronica Center cannot, therefore, content itself with simply being a collection or a gallery, but sees itself as a partner, an infrastructure and initiator. This means that it must itself participate in the establishment of its own necessity, in the creation of a fertile environment.

What is it then that distinguishes the Ars Electronica Center, as a "museum of the future", from a publicity barrage of the computer and IT industry? Essentially it is the fact that the content of this "museum" was not designed by manufacturers of products, or software developers, but is the result of an artistically motivated approach.

The Ars Electronica Center seeks to develop a kind of magnetic field, attracting not only international experts in greater number and scope, but also inquisitive, experimentally-oriented, creative people (whatever the nature of their training might be) to Linz. The idea is to create in this way a pool of competent, interested, innovative individuals who will "surrender" to the gravitational pull of the Center, not only in physical terms but also in their thinking. That is to say that they will be obliged to abandon the *modus operandi* characterised by internal deliberations at a distance and, brought now into direct proximity with the technology, to alter their approach to the objects of their deliberation. A close physical relationship of this kind automatically evokes an entirely different category of ideas than that which hitherto, in the majority of cases, had rather the nature of aesthetic remote-control.

Even in the months prior to the official inauguration, the working atmosphere at the Ars Electronica Center was not one of sterile institutional process control — it was more like an

open workshop, in which creative intelligences tested their capabilities on the equipment, and in doing so probed the extent of the latter's performance capability.

In a concentrated involvement with the machine itself, of a kind peculiar to this new generation of hacker-artists and scarcely conceivable for outsiders, in the identification with — practically a fusion with — the computer (and the network behind it), the digital revolution that now has our society in its thrall took on a graphic and concrete form.

Much of what will never leave the home directories of these "freaks", what they are unlikely even to put in the official web server of the Center, is notable above all for the process of its creation and the matter-of-factness (not to be confused with laid-back indifference) of approach to the process which characterises this, the third generation of computer users an undeniable sign of the emergence of a new culture, identified as "memesis" in this year's Festival. Thus the Festival, this year dominated by the inauguration of the Center, is itself also focused on the opening up of such zones of activity, on a new phase in the evolution of interaction with media technology, and of media art, which is needed to confront the technological revolution with that very force which it has unleashed. This is the great opportunity for the Ars Electronica Center, which must ally itself with its users, must get involved with them and grow with them. The same applies to the collaboration with artistic, innovative individuals: they must be attracted and encouraged to accept and make use of the Ars Electronica Center as their laboratory and their platform.

However, it has to be more than just a question of using electronic media as a tool. On the one hand the encounter between technologists and artists will give birth to projects which are founded on knowledge of the technological processes, on the appropriate selection of means, and on the idea of multi-media networking and its reflexion. On the other hand, artistic expertise will be made accessible to technologists and theoreticians — an approach which, in view of the increasing significance of "strategies for creative problem-solving" is in no way presumptuous. Only in the mutual accessibility of different interests, in the coexistence of research and communication, the twin functions of laboratory and information pool, can an interface be set up which meets the requirements made of it — a networking in all areas of life, which is itself a paradigm of the new information-based society.

One would need to look for a long time to find a historical analogy for that phenomenon which is currently taking place, based in part on highly contrasting premises: artists who hitherto, even in the field of media art, have worked alone and unnoticed, are now unexpectedly confronted with an extraordinary level of interest from a public which is mastering the key terms and ideological stereotypes of the digital revolution. However, this new awareness relates in fact less to the artistic activity than to the artists themselves as being, in the broadest sense, the designers, the creators, the human resource potential for the new media technologies. The uneasy feeling that without "content" the technology might not be marketable opens up many channels, and at the same time fuels the extremely dubious hope that art which makes itself useful in the service of technological matters will soon be able to earn its own keep, thus to some extent relieving the overburdened public cultural purse.

In terms of the latent limitations of his self-conception and of his social role, the artist is in a bad way. Whereas his colleagues in the classical fields still have theatres, galleries and concert-halls as approved formal contexts for their definable public persona — distribution systems which even in the one-way mass media of radio and television are still preserved to some extent —, a virtual public on the other hand, such as is represented for example by the Internet, is seen by many as an unworthy or indeed threatening void. A black hole into which

everything disappears because it is so difficult to identify and to evaluate among the general "communication waste". (As though a gallery in Hong Kong or a good article among all the newsprint in an airport kiosk were easier to track down ...)

Because everybody can take what he wants, and because — and this at least is an aspect which must be taken very seriously — it is not possible to make a living from it. Notwithstanding all of which an artist can no longer afford to stand aloof from these developments; home pages and E-mail are now self-evident components of an artist's CV.

The implementation of artistic ideas is nowadays frequently only possible with considerable technological resources, so that the traditional venues of art can only seldom provide the right framework. The "disappearance" of art and the artists — heralded and long since anticipated and rehearsed in the interdisciplinary intertwining of the genres — is now, aside from the exciting theoretical redefinition of self-conception and role model, becoming a real possibility.

The altered framework conditions demand new concepts from us. This applies equally to production, transmission and reception. In the face of the enormous challenge with which contemporary art is confronted, of establishing itself in "electronic-digital space" and maintaining a balance between the fascination of our high-tech environment and a necessary critical reflexion, interdisciplinary, networked activity has today rightly become a key concept, and not only of artistic endeavour. To be genuinely contemporary, the artist must conceive of himself as a node in a technologically-determined social environment — and in doing so assume a highly political responsibility.

By virtue of its specific infrastructure in terms of hardware and of personnel, of its twin functions as a place of production and of presentation, and also by virtue of its positioning "between the fronts", an institution such as the Ars Electronica Center assumes in this connection the nature and function of a model for its time.

Consideration of and reflexion on the interaction of art, technology and society has often only occurred within the circles of the Festival's visitors — and yet the urgency of these topics far exceeds a merely theoretical media-oriented interest, and represents a challenge which both Festival and Center will have to face.

Because it is not only the niches occupied by the artists that are coming adrift; their fate is shared by the world of classical "job descriptions" in the loss of a well-trying and tested set of rules of social order and hierarchy. Oriented as we are, mentally and economically, to the concept of work as the provider both of a livelihood and of the means to imbue it with meaning, we are intensely skeptical of the approach of once-futuristic visions of a humanity freed from labour by the benefits of technology — each of these shimmering Utopias and Promised Lands to date having, on closer inspection, proved illusory. At the present time the process of the acceptance and establishment of information technologies is still adhering rather unimaginatively to the guidelines of classical capitalism, to the detriment of ideas of social welfare. "Banal" aspects of this kind are still much too infrequently addressed in the fever of well-meaning euphoria, fostering an increasing insecurity and indeed an attitude of resistance. This makes an ongoing, frank and public debate essential.

With its early commitment to confronting the crisis of a society at the turning-point between the industrial age and the age of information, the Ars Electronica Center in Linz can only be of benefit in such a debate.

